

Why fiction is good for you

The beautiful lies of novels, movies, and TV stories have surprisingly powerful effects — and may even help make society tick

By Jonathan Gottschall

APRIL 29, 2012



JONATHAN BARTLETT/SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

Is fiction good for us? We spend huge chunks of our lives immersed in novels, films, TV shows, and other forms of fiction. Some see this as a positive thing, arguing that made-up stories cultivate our mental and moral development. But others have argued that fiction is mentally and ethically corrosive. It's an ancient question: Does fiction build the morality of individuals and societies, or does it break it down?

This controversy has been flaring up — sometimes literally, in the form of book burnings — ever since Plato tried to ban fiction from his ideal republic. In 1961, FCC chairman Newton Minow famously said that television was not working in “the public interest” because its “formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons” amounted to a “vast wasteland.” And what he said of TV programming has also been said, over the centuries, of novels, theater, comic books, and films: They are not in the public interest.

Until recently, we've only been able to guess about the actual psychological effects of fiction on individuals and society. But new research in psychology and broad-based literary analysis is finally taking questions about morality out of the realm of speculation.

This research consistently shows that fiction does mold us. The more deeply we are cast under a story's spell, the more potent its influence. In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is designed to persuade through argument and evidence. Studies show that when we read nonfiction, we read with our shields up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and this seems to make us rubbery and easy to shape.

But perhaps the most impressive finding is just how fiction shapes us: mainly for the better, not for the worse. Fiction enhances our ability to understand other people; it promotes a deep morality that cuts across religious and political creeds. More peculiarly, fiction's happy endings seem to warp our sense of reality. They make us believe in a lie: that the world is more just than it actually is. But believing that lie has important effects for society — and it may even help explain why humans tell stories in the first place.

IT'S NOT HARD to see why social critics have often been dismayed by fiction. We spend a huge amount of time lost in stories, with the average American spending four hours per day watching television alone.

And if the sheer time investment were not enough, there's the content. Since fiction's earliest beginnings, morally repulsive behavior has been a great staple of the stories we tell. From the sickening sexual violence of "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo," to the deranged sadism of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, to Oedipus stabbing his eyes out in disgust, to the horrors portrayed on TV shows like "Breaking Bad" and "CSI" — throughout time, the most popular stories have often featured the most unpleasant subject matter. Fiction's obsession with filth and vice has led critics of different stripes to condemn plays, novels, comic books, and TV for corroding values and corrupting youth.

Moreover, it's clear that these stories really can change our views. As the psychologist Raymond Mar writes, "Researchers have repeatedly found that reader attitudes shift to become more congruent with the ideas expressed in a [fictional] narrative." For example, studies reliably show that when we watch a TV show that treats gay families nonjudgmentally (say, "Modern Family"), our own views on homosexuality are likely to move in the same nonjudgmental direction. History, too, reveals fiction's ability to change our values at the societal level, for better and worse. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" helped bring about the Civil War by convincing huge numbers of Americans that blacks are people, and that enslaving them is a mortal sin. On the other hand, the 1915 film "The Birth of a Nation" inflamed racist sentiments and helped resurrect an all but defunct KKK.

So those who are concerned about the messages in fiction — whether they are conservative or progressive — have a point. Fiction is dangerous because it has the power to modify the principles of individuals and whole societies.

But fiction is doing something that all political factions should be able to get behind. Beyond the local battles of the culture wars, virtually all storytelling, regardless of genre, increases society's fund of empathy and reinforces an ethic of decency that is deeper than politics.

For a long time literary critics and philosophers have argued, along with the novelist George Eliot, that one of fiction's main jobs is to "enlarge men's sympathies." Recent lab work suggests they are right. The psychologists Mar and Keith Oatley tested the idea that entering fiction's simulated social worlds enhances our ability to connect with actual human beings. They found that heavy fiction readers outperformed heavy nonfiction readers on tests of empathy, even after they controlled for the possibility that people who already had high empathy might naturally gravitate to fiction. As Oatley puts it, fiction serves the function of "making the world a better place by improving interpersonal understanding."

Follow-up studies have reached similar conclusions. For example, one study showed that small children (age 4-6) who were exposed to a large number of children's books and films had a significantly stronger ability to read the mental and emotional states of other people. Similarly, Washington & Lee psychologist Dan Johnson recently had people read a short story that was specifically written to induce compassion in the reader. He wanted to see not only if fiction increased empathy, but whether it would lead to actual helping behavior. Johnson found that the more absorbed subjects were in the story, the more empathy they felt, and the more empathy they felt, the more likely the subjects were to help when the experimenter "accidentally" dropped a handful of pens — highly absorbed readers were twice as likely to help out. "In conclusion," Johnson writes, "it appears that 'curling up with a good book' may do more than provide relaxation and entertainment. Reading narrative fiction allows one to learn about our social world and as a result fosters empathic growth and prosocial behavior."

Similarly, novelists such as Leo Tolstoy and John Gardner have contended that fiction is morally beneficial, and here, too, research is bearing them out. While fiction often dwells on lewdness, depravity, and simple selfishness, storytellers virtually always put us in a position to judge wrongdoing, and we do so with gusto. As the Brandeis literary scholar William Flesch argues, fiction all over the world is strongly dominated by the theme of poetic justice. Generally speaking, goodness is endorsed and rewarded and badness is condemned and punished. Stories — from modern films to ancient fairy tales — steep us all in the same powerful norms and values. True, antiheroes, from Milton's Satan to Tony Soprano, captivate us, but bad guys are almost never allowed to live happily ever after. And fiction generally teaches us that it is profitable to be good.

Take a study of television viewers by the Austrian psychologist Marcus Appel. Appel points out that, for a society to function properly, people have to believe in justice. They have to believe that there are rewards for doing right and punishments for doing wrong. And, indeed, people generally do believe that life punishes the vicious and rewards the virtuous. But one class of people appear to believe these things in particular: those who consume a lot of fiction.

In Appel's study, people who mainly watched drama and comedy on TV — as opposed to heavy viewers of news programs and documentaries — had substantially stronger "just-world" beliefs. Appel concludes that fiction, by constantly exposing us to the theme of poetic justice, may be partly responsible for the sense that the world is, on the whole, a just place.

This is despite the fact, as Appel puts it, "that this is patently not the case." As people who watch the news know very well, bad things happen to good people all the time, and most crimes go unpunished. In other words, fiction seems to teach us to see the world through rose-colored lenses. And the fact that we see the world that way seems to be an important part of what makes human societies work.

ALL THESE QUESTIONS about the effects of fiction lead up to one big one: Why are humans storytelling animals at all? Why are we — as a species — so hopelessly addicted to narratives about the fake struggles of pretend people? Evolution is a ruthlessly utilitarian process. How has the seeming luxury of fiction — the apparent waste in time and creative energy — not been eliminated by the evolutionary process?

One possibility is that fiction has hidden benefits that outweigh its costs. For instance, anthropologists have long argued that stories have group-level benefits. Traditional tales, from hero epics to sacred myths, perform the essential work of defining group identity and reinforcing cultural values.

Along with three colleagues, the literary scholar Joseph Carroll and the psychologists John Johnson and Dan Kruger, I wanted to explore the possibility that fiction generally — not just folk tales — may act as a kind of social glue among humans, binding fractious individuals together around common values. So we asked hundreds of literary scholars and avid readers to respond to a questionnaire about 19th-century British novels. We asked them to answer questions about the motives and personalities of characters, and to classify them as protagonists or antagonists; we also asked questions that explored how readers felt about these characters. The results showed that antagonists and protagonists had sharply differentiated personalities. Antagonists were overwhelmingly driven by motives of power, wealth, and prestige. They didn't care about winning mates, making friends, or even helping their own kin. They were loveless, emotionally isolated egomaniacs. The protagonists, meanwhile, were keen on romance and eager to help their friends and relatives.

These results, which will be published in a book called “Graphing Jane Austen,” may seem unsurprising: In short, our heroes are heroes. But our findings were consistent with the work of the anthropologist Chris Boehm, who studies social dynamics in hunter-gatherers. Boehm notes that hunter-gatherers are egalitarian, with all members of the tribe coming together to suppress bully-boy behavior in individuals. The same kind of dynamic applies in the simulated social worlds of Victorian novels. The bad guys in these ultra-“civilized” Victorian novels were like the bullies in a hunter-gatherer band, while the good guys were self-effacing and cooperative.

Our survey respondents reacted to the characters as though they were real people: They admired the protagonists, disliked the antagonists, felt happy when the good guys succeeded, and felt sad or angry when they were threatened. By simulating a world where antisocial behavior is strongly condemned and punished, these novels were promoting ancient human values. And from these books, and from fiction more broadly, readers learn by association that if they are more like the protagonists, they'll be more likely to live happily ever after.

Fiction is often treated like a mere frill in human life, if not something worse. But the emerging science of story suggests that fiction is good for more than kicks. By enhancing empathy, fiction reduces social friction. At the same time, story exerts a kind of magnetic force, drawing us together around common values. In other words, most fiction, even the trashy stuff, appears to be in the public interest after all.

Jonathan Gottschall teaches English at Washington & Jefferson College and is the author of “The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human.” “Graphing Jane Austen” will be released in May.